

## **C. NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS**

## Daily Hampshire Gazette's website on 10/22/2008

### Guest Column: Help shape the future of a popular rail trail

*By Daily Hampshire Gazette*

The Norwottuck Rail Trail is our Valley's most popular recreation resource. Since the trail opened in 1993, thousands of men, women and children have used the trail each weekend for exercise, to experience nature and for family fun together. Hundreds more use the trail for transportation to and from work, and for shopping.

The trail has had some good news recently. It just narrowly missed a near-death experience, when the proposed "super center" in Hadley was defeated. The new mega-mall would have meant that 940 cars an hour would have crossed the trail during peak traffic each Saturday. Also, some new temporary repairs to the trail have eliminated the bumps and ruts caused by Black Locust trees when their roots push up against the asphalt from below. This repair makes the trail much easier and safer to ride, especially for rollerbladers.

But other challenges to the trail come from increased use. This past summer the trail was used in unprecedented numbers as bike sales soared along with gas prices. Access to the trail for riders, safe ways to cross Route 9 by bike and adding bike lanes to local roads remain a challenge for the future. But the trail's biggest problem, that of the embedded glass in the road surface, still needs to be corrected.

The glass, a noble experiment at recycling gone horribly wrong, has plagued riders and punctured bike tires since the trail opened. Many people in the biking community are reluctant to use the trail for this reason and bike shops across the valley have a long list of customers waiting for their flats to be fixed.

It seems now thanks to Congressman John Olver, the Department of Conservation and Recreation and MassHighway, this fault will be corrected as a \$4 million rehabilitation of the trail is set to begin in 2009. Before the design phase of the project starts, DCR is asking for public input on the project focusing on such diverse issues as beaver impacts, universal accessibility, bridges, tunnels and parking lots and vegetation management. Some trees may have to be removed from the trailside in some areas to widen the trail from the current width of eight feet to the standard 10 feet. This may also impact the wetlands that border the trail.

Given Hadley's recent controversy over tree removal in the old cemetery, this last issue is likely to be the most controversial. But other questions remain to be answered. Should the trail primarily be used for recreation, or for transportation? Is the purpose of the trail to encourage rider ship, or to get riders off the local streets? Is the trail part of a larger statewide network of bike paths, or just another linear park?

These are some of the questions we hope to discuss in the upcoming public meeting being held at Hopkins Academy in Hadley on Wednesday, Oct. 29, at 6:30 p.m. Public input is the most important part of the redesign process. I encourage everyone to come to the meeting and see what the future holds for the trail.

Andy Morris-Friedman is a resident of Hadley and a member of the Norwottuck Rail Trail Citizens Advisory Committee.

# Input sought in Hadley to improve trail

**HADLEY** — Area residents are invited to provide input on improvements that will be made to portions of the Norwottuck Rail Trail, at a meeting today at 6:30 p.m. at Hopkins Academy.

*The result, according to Rob Kusner, advisory committee member, should be a wider, safer and more enjoyable trail.*

Rob Kusner, a member of Amherst's Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee, told the Select Board on Monday that the meeting is important, so officials with the state Department of Conservation and Recreation and MassHighway who are planning the work can begin the design phase.

The work will include efforts to minimize the impacts of beavers on the trail, protect plant communities and habitats and ensure the trail is accessible to people with disabilities.

Plans are to spend \$4 million to reconstruct the oldest part of the trail, with work to begin after summer 2009, and the design to be done this winter and next spring. "It's a pretty major project for this area," said Kusner.

The result, Kusner said, should be a wider, safer and more enjoyable trail. For more information about the meeting, call Robbin Bergfors at 508-866-2580, ext. 130, or email Robbin.Bergfors@state.ma.us.

P. B4

Oct 29, 2008

Hampshire Gazette

# Alexandra Dawson: Designing Norwottuck Rail Trail

By *Daily Hampshire Gazette*

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- [opinion](#)

The Norwottuck Rail Trail is 11 miles long, running from the west end of Northampton into the east portion of Belchertown. It was intended to be much longer, but the bordering communities did not want it extended. The oldest portion, in Hadley and Amherst, is due for rehabilitation; and Rep. John Olver earmarked \$4 million for this purpose (or other rail trails in the area if he gets too bored with the wait).

Here is a heads up on the status of the repair, in the form of my perception of what is going on, not necessarily shared by the protagonists.

On Oct. 29, the state Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) held a public meeting in Hadley. DCR is in charge because the rail trail, though commonly termed a bike path, is in fact a linear state park. However, MassHighway is in charge of the bidding and construction because it considers the trail a kind of road.

The purpose of the meeting was to let Stantec, DCR's engineering consultant, explain what had been studied and to collect public comment. As expected, Stantec focused on the width of the trail, glass in the asphalt, beaver damage, wetland impacts, and the problem of tree roots bumping up the surface. Stantec is also concerned with public access and the disabilities law, which is much more aggressively enforced than 15 years ago when the trail was built. Stantec expects to reach the "25 percent design" stage by next spring, but refused to speculate on when work would actually be done. In truth, the 25 percent design is much closer to a final design than the term would imply. It signals the only public hearing required under the MassHighway design manual, in spite of efforts by myself and others to require other occasions for formal public input.

A number of people at the meeting expressed a desire for a 10-foot paved surface. In fact, a few seemed close to implying that it would be nicer and safer for whatever use they made of it if the other types of users would just back off. This is a natural response to mixed use, but the rail trail is officially a multiple-use state park. Ten feet would be nice, but the only way it could be achieved in much of the route would be to sacrifice the two-foot grassed areas on each side. The grassed areas are for people pausing or having problems; and certainly no one wants users to stop dead in the paved lanes. Some really large obstacles exist to

making the whole trail 14 feet wide (including the grassed areas) - for example, widening the 8-foot wide tunnel under Route 9 and rebuilding the railroad embankments. The trail contains three tunnels and four bridges. It was suggested that the width might vary; but Stantec seemed to prefer the idea of periodic stopping places and bump-outs.

Meanwhile, the hunt is on for black locusts as the principal perps in the root problem. The trees to be removed will be marked, but I was unable to get a firm commitment to let the public view and comment on the marking, to make sure that a locust wipeout did not happen for simplicity's sake. Root barriers have been tried on the Easthampton rail trail and the wretched roots just go over or under them, seeking, for some reason, the area just below the tarmac. No one seems to know why the roots are doing this, but I wish Stantec would at least Google this. It begins to appear that most bike paths are either unpaved or definitely downtown. Removal of trees on the Cape Cod facility has been criticized for making the trip hotter.

Public access for the handicapped can probably be improved at the Hadley end, but access for construction and emergencies is going to be a stinker in the long stretches between road crossings. A lot will depend on the land ownership along the trail, which is definitely eccentric, as the railroad, for whatever reason, bought chunks of land both wide and narrow. Access is a legitimate concern but it should not dominate the design. Neither should the turning radius for DCR's "adaptive" cycles.

In my opinion, construction will not take place until at least 2011, unless Congressman Olver does some major leaning or spends his \$4 million earmark elsewhere. The fabled 25 percent design stage is just the beginning of MassHighway's 28-point checkout. Then the bidding law takes over. In recent years, it has taken MassHighway a year or so to get bids out, plus the time to actually award the contract. The federal fiscal year ended in October and bids not published by Halloween await the next year. Hence the 2011 guess. This is the reason I argued so long and hard to get some temporary patching done. I think it has worked out pretty well, although I no longer travel beyond the Route 9 tunnel. Constant vigilance is the price of practically everything in life.

Until Dec. 31, you can participate in a Pre-Design Trail User Survey on the project Web page at [www.mass.gov/dcr/projects/norwottuck](http://www.mass.gov/dcr/projects/norwottuck) <sup>[1]</sup> or writing to Robbin Bergfors, DCR, P.O. Box 66, South Carver, MA 02366.

Alexandra Dawson lives in Hadley and writes a monthly column about environmental and conservation issues.

## LETTERS

Hampshire Gazette, November 14, 2008  
Letter to the Editor

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### Rail trail accessibility important for the disabled

To the editor:

I am writing in response to Alexandra Dawson's "Designing Norwottuck Rail Trail" column that was printed on November 10. She references that "access (for the disabled) is a legitimate concern but it should not dominate the design. Neither should the turning radius for DCR's 'adaptive' cycles."

According to the 2000 census, 16 percent of Hampshire County residents have a disability. Considering access in the trail's design is not a question of dominating the design. It is a question of making a public facility accessible to everyone.

All Out Adventures operates 30 programs each year on the Norwottuck Rail Trail where, thanks in large part to DCR's "adaptive" cycles, hundreds of people with disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy the trail. As it stands now people who use the adaptive cycles, which are longer and wider than traditional bicycles, cannot turn around on the trail. Turnarounds that can accommodate the larger turning radius of the adaptive cycles are one way to make the trail more accessible to people of all abilities. They would also benefit families and novice riders

who need more space to turn around.

Our friends and neighbors with disabilities should be able to use the entire Norwottuck Rail Trail with dignity and with reasonable access. If millions of dollars are to be spent in improving the Norwottuck Rail Trail, it would be shortsighted not to consider equal access to be a high priority in every aspect of the design.

Karen Foster  
Easthampton

*Hampshire Gazette*  
**Extra space needed on sides  
of Norwottuck Rail Trail**

To the editor:

I enjoyed Alexandra Dawson's column in the Nov. 10 edition, as I always do. I have considerable respect for the work she does and her advocacy for the natural environment. However, she got her compass points reversed: the Norwottuck Rail Trail runs from the east end of Northampton to the west end of Belchertown. Having also ridden the Cape Cod Rail Trail, I would beg to differ with her characterization of it as a hot ride in the shadeless sun.

I attended the same presentation meeting. One detail that Dawson omits from her narrative is that the \$4 million earmarked by Congressman Olver for the reconstruction came from Federal transportation, not recreation funds. Therefore, if the redesign fails to meet the specifications for a safe bicycle transportation corridor insofar as possible (including the handicapped accessibility issue) the funds could be withdrawn from it.

There is no plan, nor any desire, to turn the trail into a cycling interstate, but it needs the extra foot on each side to be safe for the number of users it has. The designers said they plan to address the need for "pull-offs" at critical and scenic locations.

Marvin J. Ward

*Nov. 18, 2008* Williamsburg